Where and When Did the Events of the Old Testament Take Place?

2

Outline

- **Where Did the Events of the Old Testament Take Place?**
  - Three Regions of the Ancient Near East
  - Four Subregions of Israel
  - Highways of the Ancient Near East
- **What Events Does the Old Testament Describe?**
  - Israel's Ancestry: The Patriarchs
  - Israel's Beginnings: Moses and Joshua
  - Israel's Statehood: David and His Dynasty
  - Israel's Exile and Restoration: Ezra and Nehemiah

Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to

- Identify on a map the three geographical regions of the ancient Near East
- Compare the development of the cultures of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Syria-Palestine
- Discuss the key geographic features of the four subregions of Israel
- Trace the highlights of the history of Israel and the ancient Near East during the New Stone Age, Copper-Stone Age, Early Bronze Age, Middle Bronze Age, Late Bronze Age, Iron Age I, and Iron Age II
- List the different peoples who significantly influenced the history of Israel

incarnation

We read in the New Testament that God revealed himself to humanity through the **incarnation**; that is, God took on human form in Jesus of Nazareth. This means God's revelation occurred in a specific time and place. In order for us to understand the message of the New Testament, we must study the events of the life of Christ and the early church. The history and geography of the first-century world of Palestine provide an important background for Christians reading the New Testament.

Similarly, God's revealed truth in the Old Testament is also incarnational. God revealed himself in specific times and places to a specific group of people, the Israelites. It is just as important for Christians to understand the time in which ancient Israel existed as it is to know the background for the New Testament. This chapter discusses the land in which God's revelation occurred and the major events of Old Testament history.

Fertile Crescent

Where Did the Events of the Old Testament Take Place?

Ancient Israel was one small part of a larger area known as the ancient Near East. This designation refers essentially to what is known today as the Middle East. It stretches from the Zagros Mountains in the east to the Mediterranean Sea in the west. The northern boundaries of the ancient Near East reach to the Caspian and Black Seas, with the Caucasus Mountains between them. The southern boundaries were formed by the Arabian Desert and two large bodies of water (the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea).

Though Israel was geographically smaller than many of its neighbors in the ancient Near East, its location was strategically important throughout ancient history. This small piece of land forms a bridge connecting three continents: Asia, Africa, and Europe.[1] This crossroads location for Israel had two important consequences. First, many nations and empires throughout history desired to control, or at least have access to, Israel for purposes of trade and transportation to other parts of the ancient world. Second, many foreign cultural influences poured into ancient Israel. Thus Israel was exposed to great cultural interchange and commerce throughout its history.

Three Regions of the Ancient Near East

The ancient Near East contains three geographical subregions joined by an arch of rich soil known as the "**Fertile Crescent**" (notice that the shaded area on the map "The Ancient Near East During the Old Testament Period" is shaped like a crescent). Most of the terrain of the ancient world was rugged and inhospitable to human life. The fertile lands are bordered by nearly impassable mountain ranges to the north and vast deserts to the south. But within the crescent, flat lands and an abundance of water made this location the birthplace of human civilization.

The three geographical subregions of the ancient Near East are Mesopotamia, Syria-Palestine, and Egypt. These three regions were all marked in early antiquity by important river cultures.

Mesopotamia

The Greek term "Mesopotamia" ("between the rivers") refers to that great stretch of land between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers.[2] This region extends from the mouth of the Persian Gulf northwestward along the bend in the Euphrates and eastward beyond the Tigris reaching the foot of the Zagros Mountains. All of modern Iraq and Kuwait, and parts of Iran, Syria, and Lebanon, make up the area known as Mesopotamia.

Mesopotamia's terrain is greatly varied, from the mountainous northern regions to the desert sands of the southwest. The weather is unpredictable, and the waters of the twin rivers are capricious. Flooding posed an ever-present threat for the ancient Mesopotamians, but so did drought. Consequently the region, especially in the south, hovered constantly between desert and swamp. Nor were there any natural defenses to ward off enemy invaders.

In spite of all the dangers, Mesopotamia could provide a good life for those fortunate enough to live there. This was especially true in southern Mesopotamia, where the river water could be channeled to provide irrigation for crops or navigated for purposes of trade. Scholars of earliest human history believe civilization began in the foothills north

THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST DURING THE OLD TESTAMENT PERIOD

Neolithic Age

of the Tigris River, when ancient Mesopotamians of the **Neolithic Age** (ca. 7000 BC) first cultivated plants, domesticated animals, and began farming. Sometime around 3100 BC, the Sumerians invented writing in southern Mesopotamia when they discovered they could use wedgelike shapes on various materials to represent words. The wedge-shaped writing (known as **cuneiform**, from Latin *cuneus* ["wedge"] and *forma* ["form"]) was most easily incised into wet clay, a substance readily accessible in southern Mesopotamia. Often the scribe would bake the clay tablets in the sun or in an oven, producing extremely durable cuneiform tablets, thousands of which have been discovered by modern archaeologists. Cuneiform could also be inscribed on metal or stone.

cuneiform

The potential good life in Mesopotamia was no secret to others living in the ancient Near East. With no natural defenses, those enjoying life in Mesopotamia had to keep an eye on external threats. Throughout ancient history, Mesopotamia saw the influx of many different people groups and changes of power. The Sumerians were followed by a long succession of Semites of various nationalities. During the last quarter of the third millennium BC, the first group of Semites, the Akkadians, rose to power and occupied southern Mesopotamia together with the Sumerians. But by the turn of the millennium, another Semitic group known as the Amorites began to arrive in enormous numbers; they dominated the next thousand years of history in Mesopotamia. The Amorites eventually established major foci of power in the south at Babylon on the Euphrates, and in the north at Assur and Nineveh along the Tigris. The Babylonians in the south and the Assyrians in the north were two of the most important groups in Mesopotamia and played a significant role in Old Testament history.

Bilingual inscription in Sumerian and Akkadian featuring cuneiform writing, 2270 BC.

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Egypt

hieroglyphs

Some of the geographical features that made early human civilization possible in Mesopotamia were also present in northeastern Africa along the Nile River.[3] While Mesopotamia showed a slow and gradual development from the Stone Age to the beginnings of human history, Egypt appears to have suddenly jumped from the Neolithic Age into urban culture. The relative suddenness of the birth of civilization in Egypt is probably attributable to Mesopotamian influences on the Nile Valley. The development of Egyptian **hieroglyphs** (Latin *hieroglyphicus*, "sacred carving") may have been influenced by Mesopotamian cuneiform, though this is far from certain.[4]

One ancient historian fittingly described Egypt as the gift of the Nile River.[5] Without question, the Nile is the dominant geographic feature of Egypt, and it played a major role in Egypt's history and cultural outlook on life. This great river stretches more than six hundred miles through the northeastern deserts of Africa to the Mediterranean Sea. The Nile thus created a sharp contrast between the

Satellite view of the Nile River showing the sharp contrast between the green fertile riverside fields along its banks and the brown desert beyond them. The Nile is the dominant geographical feature of Egypt and has played a major role in Egypt's history.

NASA

riverside meadow and the desert on either side. The fertile black soil of the river valley abounded with life and vitality, while the lifeless red desert sands reminded the ancient Egyptians of their mortality. The Egyptians called the rich soil of the Nile Valley "the black land" and the encroaching desert sands beyond "the red land."[6] They clearly treasured the great muddy river that brought life-giving water and soil.

In ancient times, 90 percent of the population lived in the fertile river valley, which was seldom more than ten miles wide. The Nile has no tributaries, and the country has no rainfall except for coastal showers along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. The Egyptians understood how dependent they were on the river to maintain life in their "black land." They gave credit to their god-king, the **pharaoh**, for the Nile's annual flood. From a source far south of Egypt, beyond their understanding, the river predictably rose every June, peaked in September, and then returned to its normal level by November. This annual inundation was vitally important to continued prosperity in Egypt because its waters brought rich layers of silt and rejuvenated the soil, making Egypt's "black land" one of the richest lands in the world. This helps explain how devastating the plagues described in the book of Exodus were to the Egyptians, as we shall see.[7]

The long and narrow river valley also tended to create a severe contrast between north and south in ancient Egypt. The south included, and was distinguished by, the length of the Nile and was called Upper Egypt (since the southern region is upstream). Lower Egypt consisted of the delta created where the Nile spreads out and empties into the Mediterranean Sea. This contrast resulted in marked differences in language dialects and cultural outlooks on life. The geographically isolated Upper Egypt depended on cattle herding and was provincial and conservative. Lower Egypt was interested in commercial trade because of its access to European and Asian seaports. It had an international and cosmopolitan flavor.[8] Political unification was the first task of the pharaoh, and the strategic central location of the city of Memphis was obviously important.

Unlike Mesopotamia, Egypt enjoyed relative seclusion from the outside world. The desert borders and the Mediterranean Sea to the north provided natural geographical boundaries and meant that Egypt experienced fewer incidents of foreign aggression throughout its history. There were occasional threats from Libya to the west or invasions

pharaoh

by sea. But the normal concern for Egyptian security was Asian invaders from across the Sinai Peninsula and a region now marked by the Suez Canal. With a few exceptions, however, the Egyptians were able to contain these threats with mere police actions. Compared to Mesopotamia, Egypt was relatively free from invasion. As a result, Egypt did not encounter the large number of ethnic and cultural infiltrations dotting Mesopotamian history.

Egyptian history is, therefore, not one of constant power changes and new people groups but rather the rise and fall of mostly native Egyptian dynasties. Some of these dynasties saw Egypt develop large empires with international significance in ancient Near Eastern history. These periods of imperial strength fall naturally into the Old Kingdom (dynasties 3–6, 2700–2200 BC), the Middle Kingdom (dynasties 11–13, 2000–1700 BC), and the New Kingdom (dynasties 18–20, 1550–1100 BC). Thus the Egypt of the patriarchs was likely Middle Kingdom Egypt, and that of Moses and the exodus, New Kingdom Egypt. By the time of Israel's united monarchy, Egypt had lost its position as an international superpower, though it continued to wield significant cultural influence.

Levant

rift

Syria-Palestine

Syria-Palestine is the area from the northern bend of the Euphrates along the Mediterranean coast, southward to the Sinai desert. Israel was the southernmost section of Syria-Palestine.

The great river cultures of Mesopotamia and Egypt were made possible by geographical features leading to the organization and unification of the regions. The rivers were large enough to make trade accessible, facilitating economic growth. The geographical features of Mesopotamia and Egypt also made national unification possible.

By contrast, Syria-Palestine is characterized by segmentation. Smaller rivers (the Jordan and the Orontes, see map, "The Ancient Near East During the Old Testament Period") and vast differences of topography divided the region into subdivisions and smaller territories. Syria-Palestine was not the site of advanced civilization or national empires early in history. Instead, its primary geopolitical importance was its role as a land bridge along the Fertile Crescent. Throughout ancient history, the empires of the great river cultures, Egypt and Mesopotamia, sought to control access to Syria-Palestine for both economic and military/political reasons.

In addition to forming a land bridge connecting three continents, the area is marked by two other topographical features. First, the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea forms the western boundary of this area. The coast (known as the "**Levant**") extends for four hundred miles and became the crossroads for all trade and travel in the ancient world. The second important feature in Syria-Palestine's topography is known as the "**rift**." The Jordan Rift is a great fissure in the surface of the earth extending from north of the Sea of Galilee through the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea to the shores of the Red Sea. To the north, this cleavage is framed by the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon mountain ranges (see map, "Four Subregions of Israel"). The altitude descends steadily as one moves south to the Dead Sea, the surface of which is 1,275 feet below sea level, the lowest point on earth.[9]

Four Subregions of Israel

The prominent topographical feature of all of Syria-Palestine, the Jordan Rift, also plays a role in Israel's longitudinal orientation. The country is divided north to south into four zones: the coastal plains, the central mountain range, the Jordan Rift, and the Transjordanian Highlands.[10]

FOUR SUBREGIONS OF ISRAEL

The coastal plains

The coastal plains are narrow in the north but gradually become broader in the south as the coastline slants westward, as the map "Four Subregions of Israel" illustrates. This region was one of the richest in ancient Israel because of its fertile soil and the accessibility of water (numerous springs and high groundwater level).

The striking characteristic of Israel's coastline compared to the rest of the Levant in the north is the lack of natural harbors. The city of Acco, in the Bay of Haifa, was the only important harbor in Israel in Old Testament times (see map, "Four Subregions of Israel"). By contrast, the coastal strip between the Mediterranean Sea and the Lebanon Mountains north of Israel had many natural harbors because of the jagged terrain rising out of the sea. The Phoenicians, who occupied this strip during most of the Old Testament period, used these harbors to good advantage, becoming expert sailors and sea merchants. The Israelites never quite learned to trust the sea, however, and regularly hired Phoenician expertise whenever it was necessary to put to sea (1 Kings 9:26–27).

This coastal zone has six subregions from north to south: the Plain of Acco, the Jezreel Valley, the Sharon Plain, the Philistine Coast, the Shephelah (or "low-hills"), and the western Negeb or southern desert (see map, "Four Subregions of Israel"). The Jezreel Valley is the only exception to Israel's longitudinal orientation, since it interrupts the central highlands and connects the coastal plains in the west with the Jordan Rift to the east. This valley's rich soil and its location as an intersection for the region's great highways (see map, "Highways of the Ancient Near East") meant that the major military powers of the biblical period passed through it and often attempted to control it.

The southern coastal plain was home to Israel's most bitter enemies, the Philistines, throughout most of the Old Testament period. The greatest concentration of Philistines and their five major cities occupied this plain. From the period of the judges until David's rise to the throne, the Philistines fought intermittently with the Israelites of the central highlands.

The ridge, or central mountain range

A ridge of hills rises sharply between the coastal plains and the Jordan Rift. These highlands may be subdivided into four main regions: Galilee, Ephraim, Judean hill country, and the eastern Negeb (see map, "Four Subregions of Israel").

The highest point along the Levant coast is the towering Mount Hermon, with an altitude of over 9,200 feet.[11] Just south of Mount Hermon, Upper Galilee reaches elevations of over 3,000 feet. A steep slope separates Upper Galilee from Lower Galilee to the south, with altitudes just below 2,000 feet.

The central hills of Ephraim and the Judean hill country are quite similar. This range of mountains is protected on both slopes by deep streambeds, making east–west passage difficult. A north–south road along the eastern slope connects the hills of Ephraim with the Judean hill country. Many major cities lay along this road: Mizpah, Shechem, Shiloh, and Bethel in Ephraim, and Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Hebron in Judah. The eastern part of the desert south of Judah (the "Negeb") has a continuation of the hills of the central mountain range.

The Jordan Rift

This main topographical feature of Syria-Palestine plays a prominent role in the shape of Israel's landscape. The deep depression in the earth's surface has an average width of 10 miles and descends from an altitude of about

300 feet in the north to 1,275 feet below the Mediterranean at the shore of the Dead Sea.[12] In the center of the rift, the Jordan River flows down from the foot of Mount Hermon to the Dead Sea.

The Jordan Rift may be subdivided north to south into five regions: the Huleh Valley, Chinnereth (that is, the Sea of Galilee), the Jordan Valley, the Dead Sea, and the Arabah (see map, "Four Subregions of Israel").

The Transjordanian Highlands

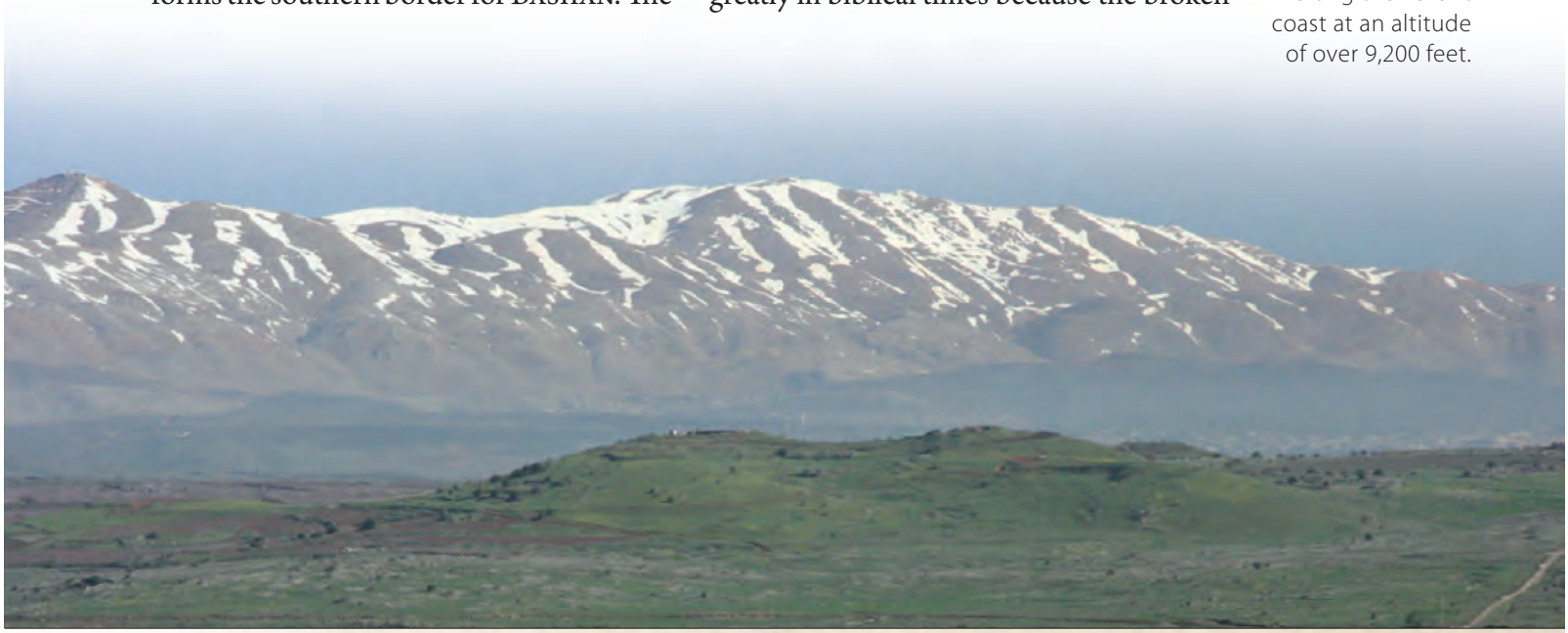
East of the Jordan Rift the land rises sharply into a plateau, which gradually gives way to the Arabian Desert. This steep plateau reaches greater altitudes than much of the central highlands, then drops precipitously as one moves westward down to the Jordan Valley. The Transjordanian Highlands reach heights of up to 5,700 feet in the south, such as in the mountains of Edom.

This mountain tableland is divided by four river canyons: Yarmuk, Jabbok, Arnon, and Zered. These rivers flow through deep gorges in the plateau into the Jordan River or the Dead Sea. Frequently in biblical history these rivers formed natural boundaries for national or political entities. The Yarmuk forms the southern border for Bashan. The area from the Yarmuk to the Jabbok we may conveniently refer to as Gilead. The territory between the Jabbok and the Arnon was Moabite land during much of the Old Testament period. South of the Zered was Edomite country. So the Transjordanian Highlands may be subdivided into four areas from north to south: Bashan, Gilead, Moab, and Edom (see map, "Four Subregions of Israel"). Most of the borders were fluid, changing frequently in biblical times.

The eastern extremes of the Transjordanian Highlands enjoy no natural border with the Arabian Desert. The fate of this mountain plateau in biblical times was often tied to its relationship with the desert. Scorching winds and migratory desert nomads often made it difficult to maintain agriculture and a settled life. And yet the high ridges bordering on the Jordan Rift caught the benefits of the Mediterranean storms, which created enough rainfall to support sheep herding and crops of wheat.

Highways of the Ancient Near East

Of the many important highways and communication routes of the ancient world, two international roadways require mention here.[13] Their precise courses did not vary greatly in biblical times because the broken



Mount Hermon, the highest point along the Levant coast at an altitude of over 9,200 feet.

HIGHWAYS OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

topography of Syria-Palestine made it difficult to create new routes.

The way of the sea (*Via Maris*)

Via Maris

The title "way of the sea" comes from Isaiah 9:1 and refers to an international road running along the Levant coast (see map, "Highways of the Ancient Near East"). This highway was used throughout the biblical period, and some of the most important cities of antiquity were located near it. The **Vulgate** rendered Isaiah's phrase as *Via Maris*, which was used in later times to designate the whole network of roadways from Egypt through Syria-Palestine into Mesopotamia.

Vulgate

On the southern coastal plain, the *Via Maris* moves northward and splits into two branches, the western continuing along the coast and the eastern passing through the Jezreel Valley to Megiddo, and from there to Hazor and Damascus and on into Mesopotamia. The various branches of this great international highway converge at Megiddo, at the entrance to the Jezreel Valley. The valley, and especially the city of Megiddo, were strategic locations for all commerce and travel in the ancient world.

The King's Highway

The second important international route is the "King's Highway" (taken from Num. 20:17; 21:22). This roadway extends from the Gulf of Aqabah at Elath through the Transjordanian Highlands to Damascus (see map, "Highways of the Ancient Near East"). Because of the four deep river beds in the Transjordanian plateau, the highway follows a path twenty-five to thirty miles east of the Arabah on the very edge of the desert.

This was a secondary route from Damascus to Egypt, often competing with the *Via Maris*. It was most popular for nomadic caravans transporting commercial goods and for the trade of agricultural products. During the Israelite monarchy, the King's Highway attained a special significance because of increased trade with Arabia.

What Events Does the Old Testament Describe?

The details of New Testament history cover only about a century. By contrast, the history

of Old Testament Israel spans nearly two millennia. During this length of time, Israelites came in contact with many different peoples and nations. The Old Testament makes frequent reference to Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Arameans, and many other important peoples. This section traces the broad outline of Israel's history and also introduces the most important people groups.[14]

Israel's Ancestry: The Patriarchs

Historians do not have enough evidence to give precise dates for some of the events we discuss in this survey text. In fact, since absolute chronology is impossible, archaeologists divide the millennia before the Christian era into periods according to the technology available at the time. So after the various Stone Ages (**Paleolithic**, **Mesolithic**, Neolithic, and **Chalcolithic**), we can refer in the broadest of terms to the **Bronze Age** and the **Iron Age**. These terms do not mean to imply that the switches from stone to bronze to iron were sudden, or that only bronze was used for tools and other utensils during the Bronze Age while only iron was used during the Iron Age. But in general, around 3300 BC, bronze technology spread throughout the ancient Near East, and around 1200 BC, people discovered the greater benefits of the use of iron.

The period from about 3300 to 2000 BC is known as the **Early Bronze Age**. This period witnessed the invention of writing and the beginnings of human history. In Mesopotamia, the Sumerians first used cuneiform extensively for writing; in Egypt, the use of hieroglyphics during the Old Kingdom period is well attested. In Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine, city-states first began to grow, and with them the need for communication, travel, and trade. In Mesopotamia, a series of strong city-states gained dominance during the Sumerian early dynastic periods. Toward the end of the Early Bronze Age, the first Semitic empire gained control of all of southern Mesopotamia from a power base at the city of Akkad (2334–2193 BC).[15] In Egypt, the Early Bronze Age saw the flowering of the Old Kingdom period, which was the era of the great pyramids and the apex of Egyptian culture.[16] By the close of the Early Bronze Age, all the main features of human civilization and culture had appeared in both Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Although precise dates for Israel's patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) are impossible to determine, they may be generally placed in the **Middle Bronze Age** (2000–1550 BC).[17] This period of ancient Near Eastern history is marked by the movement of ethnic groups and new empires replacing the older powers of the Early Bronze Age. In Mesopotamia, after a brief renaissance of Sumerian culture (Ur III dynasty, 2112–2004 BC), the country came under the control of a new Semitic element, the Amorites. Early in the Middle Bronze Age, the Amorites ruled Mesopotamia from several strong city-states in an uncertain balance of power. But then one individual from the city of Babylon was able to consolidate his strength and establish a new empire throughout Mesopotamia. Hammurapi rose to power in 1792 and established the Old Babylonian Empire, which endured until 1595 BC.[18] Hammurapi is most famous for his collection of laws, many of which bear striking resemblance to the laws of Moses in the Pentateuch.

In Egypt, after a period of darkness and confusion called the First Intermediate Period (2200–2000 BC), the country once again flourished during the Middle Kingdom period (2000–1700 BC). The Middle Kingdom was a time of peace and stability, and one in which Egypt engaged in trade with the Levant, resulting in the acquisition of considerable wealth. But toward the end of the

Middle Bronze Age

Paleolithic Age
Mesolithic Age
Chalcolithic Age
Bronze Age
Iron Age

Early Bronze Age

Archaeological Periods of Ancient Near Eastern History

Approximate dates (BC)	Archaeological period	Israel	Ancient Near East
Before 14,000	Old Stone Age (Paleolithic)		Pre-cave culture
14,000–8000	Middle Stone Age (Mesolithic)		Cave culture
8000–4200	New Stone Age (Neolithic)		Neolithic Revolution: cultivation of crops and beginning of rain-based agriculture, domestication of animals, first permanent settlements
4200–3300	Copper-Stone Age (Chalcolithic)		Metal replaces stone in the production of tools and weapons
3300–2000	Early Bronze Age		Invention of writing; birth of human civilization; Egyptian Old Kingdom; Sumerian and Akkadian kingdoms in Mesopotamia; Old Canaanite culture at Ebla
2000–1550	Middle Bronze Age	Israel's patriarchs	Arrival of Amorites and other ethnic groups in Mesopotamia; Old Babylonian Empire; Egyptian Middle Kingdom
1550–1200	Late Bronze Age	Egyptian bondage; birth of Moses; the exodus; wilderness wanderings; Israelite conquest and settlement of Canaan	International contacts and balance of power; powerful Egyptian New Kingdom exerts influence in Syria-Palestine; rise and fall of the new Hittite Empire; Kassite control in Mesopotamia
1200–930	Iron Age I	Period of the judges; united monarchy: Saul, David, Solomon	Invasion of sea peoples and disruption of major powers; rise of new ethnic groups, including Arameans and Israelites; rise of Assyria
930–539	Iron Age II	Divided kingdom; fall of Israel in 722; fall of Judah in 587	Weakened Egypt; Assyria reaches greatest strength before fall in 612; Neo-Babylonian Empire: Nebuchadnezzar
539–332	Iron Age III	Return of Jewish exiles; Ezra and Nehemiah; building of second temple and walls of Jerusalem	Cyrus captures Babylon in 539; Persian Empire

Sources: Philip J. King, *American Archaeology in the Mideast: A History of the American Schools of Oriental Research* (Philadelphia: ASOR, 1983), 282; Larry G. Herr, "Periodization," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4:267–73; Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, 10,000–586 B.C.E.*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 30.

Middle Bronze Age, Egypt also succumbed to the rise of Semites, which is characteristic of the Fertile Crescent throughout this period. Native Egyptian rule in the country ended when the Hyksos, Semites probably from Syria-Palestine, took control of the delta in the north. Whether the Hyksos invaded and took control, or whether they had been gradually growing in strength is not known. They ruled Egypt for about 150 years in what is called the Second Intermediate Period (1700–1540 BC). For the first time in Egypt's history, the country was conquered and dominated by foreigners.

The Middle Bronze Age world in which Abram likely lived was one of peoples on the move. Semitic peoples were settling in Syria-Palestine too. The Canaanites were establishing city-states in the coastal plains and valleys as early as the third millennium BC. These people may have been of the same Amorite stock as those who had settled Mesopotamia.[19]

Abram departed from Ur of the Chaldeans in southern Mesopotamia with his extended family and journeyed to HARAN on the Euphrates in northwestern Mesopotamia. His father, Terah, died in Haran while Abram (whose name was changed to Abraham) was called to travel on in faith to an unknown land.[20] When Abraham reached Canaan, God established a **covenant** with him and promised to give him a vast number of descendants and the land of Canaan as an inheritance. These promises were uniquely suited for a transitory, migrant Amorite looking for land to settle. After many years, Isaac was miraculously born to Abraham's wife, Sarah, when she was ninety years old and Abraham was one hundred years old.

Isaac's wife Rebekah had twin sons, Jacob and Esau. Although Esau was the oldest, Jacob became the child of the patriarchal promises. Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel, had twelve sons. His favorite son, Joseph, was betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery, and taken to Egypt. While in Egypt, Joseph was blessed by God and miraculously rose to high political office in the foreign land. During a severe drought, the sons of Israel traveled to Egypt in search of food for the family back in Canaan. Much to their surprise, they were confronted by the very brother whom they had betrayed, and now their lives were in his hands. Remarkably, Joseph forgave his brothers, provided food for them, and saved their lives. Israel and all his children moved from Canaan to Goshen in the northeastern Delta of Egypt.

We can date these events no more precisely than a general time in the Middle Bronze Age (2000–1550 BC). The Hyksos rule of Egypt (1700–1550 BC) may well have been the time when the children of Israel lived in Egypt and multiplied so rapidly. But once the Hyksos were expelled, a "new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt" (Exod. 1:8). The "new king" probably refers to the first king of a different dynasty. For the next several hundred years, the Israelites were enslaved by the Egyptians and forced to build their cities and drive their economy.

Israel's Beginnings: Moses and Joshua

covenant

Late Bronze Age

The **Late Bronze Age** (1550–1200 BC) was one of international trade and balance of world powers, with Syria-Palestine caught in the middle. The Egyptians successfully ended their subjugation to the Hyksos and entered the period of their greatest political strength, the **New Kingdom** (dynasties 18–20, 1550–1100 BC).

New Kingdom

Whereas Egypt was dominant throughout this period, Mesopotamia experienced a time of political weakness. After the fall of Hammurapi's Old Babylonian Empire, southern Mesopotamia was controlled by foreigners from the Zagros Mountains, the KASSITES. The long rule of the Kassite dynasty (over three hundred years) brought peace and stability to Babylonia, though not military superiority. The Kassites preferred peace treaties and other nonmilitary means of diplomacy to defend their borders. They adopted many elements of traditional Babylonian culture and raised southern Mesopotamia to a new level of international prestige during this period. The Babylonian dialect of Akkadian became the **lingua franca**, or international language of the day.

lingua franca

Relief showing Akhenaten with his family under the sun disk, Aten. Akhenaten elevated Aten, the visible image of the sun, to a place of supremacy and came close to monotheistic worship.

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Egypt's powerful rulers of the New Kingdom attempted to control the coastal areas of Syria-Palestine, the coastal highway to Phoenicia (*Via Maris*), and Nubia to the south.[21] By controlling commercial trade with the Aegean and the rest of western Asia, Egypt dominated trade and acquired tremendous wealth and prosperity. At the height of this empire, Amenhotep IV of the Eighteenth Dynasty became pharaoh in about 1353 BC. Soon thereafter he changed his name to Akhenaten and moved the capital about two hundred miles north of Thebes to modern El-Amarna. For about a decade, Akhenaten elevated Aten, the visible image of the sun, to a place of supremacy and came close to monotheistic worship. Hundreds of clay tablets written in Babylonian (the so-called **Amarna Letters**) have been found at Akhenaten's short-lived capital. These letters from Egyptian vassal-kings in Syria-Palestine and rulers in Anatolia and Mesopotamia reflect the politics of the mid-fourteenth century BC. It appears that Akhenaten was no longer capable of controlling the city-states of Syria-Palestine. Whether through neglect or military weakness, Egypt began to lose its international grip in western Asia.

Amarna Letters

In Anatolia, the Hittite Empire gained control of western Asia Minor and north Syria. Under strong royal leadership, the Hittites retained control of Syria almost as far south as Damascus from about 1344 to 1239 BC.[22] Hittite kings fought the pharaohs of Egypt's Nineteenth Dynasty for control of Syria-Palestine, eventually coming to a draw in the mid-thirteenth century. Toward the end of the Late Bronze Age, the Hittite king Hattushili III and the Egyptian Ramesses II agreed to a peace treaty, ending the hostilities between the two nations.

Sometime during the Late Bronze Age, while Israel suffered under the heavy burden of slavery in Egypt, Moses was born to the tribe of Levi. At the time of Moses's birth, Pharaoh was attempting to control the rapidly growing Israelite population by killing newborn Israelite boys. But Moses was miraculously saved by Pharaoh's own daughter and raised in the Egyptian royal court. There he was providentially given the finest Egyptian education (Acts 7:22).

Moses was prepared and called by God to lead the Israelites out of their bondage in Egypt. God used a series of ten plagues to prove that *he* was in control of the cosmic order, not the Egyptian god-king, Pharaoh. These plagues demonstrated the superiority and majesty of Israel's God, Yahweh. God then used Moses to deliver the Israelites from Egypt and bring them to the Sinai Peninsula to establish a covenant with them. There he gave them the law to maintain the new covenant relationship and protect them in the promised land they were to inherit.

The new nation, Israel, rejected God's leadership in the wilderness and refused to enter the promised land. God punished the people of Israel by requiring them to wander for forty years in the wilderness. During this time the rebellious generation died. Moses also died in the plains of Moab without having the privilege of entering the land promised to the patriarchs. Joshua, Moses's

successor, led the nation Israel in conquest of the promised land, fulfilling the promises to the patriarchs.

While it is not possible to give these events a precise date, it is clear that the Israelite exodus occurred sometime during the New Kingdom period of Egyptian history. Scholars have proposed two possible dates for the exodus event, approximately 1446 or 1275 (see chapter 6 of this volume). The question is whether the pharaoh of the exodus was Thutmose III (perhaps Amenhotep II) of the Eighteenth Dynasty or Ramesses II of the Nineteenth Dynasty. Regardless of the inability of modern scholars to date these historical events precisely, the exodus narratives in the Bible reflect genuine Late Bronze Age customs, and we have no reason to doubt their historicity.[23]

Israel's Statehood: David and His Dynasty

Around 1200 BC, cataclysmic changes began to occur in the ancient Near East. The major powers (notably the Egyptians and the Hittites) suddenly declined, and the political map changed dramatically. Most scholars assume that the changes started with the fall of Troy (ca. 1250) and the subsequent fall of the Mycenaean cities on the mainland of Greece. Survivors must have fled by sea along the coasts of the Mediterranean, disrupting all the major powers of the ancient world. These newcomers are known collectively as "**sea peoples**." One group of these sea peoples, known from Egyptian sources as "Peleset," settled on the southwest coastal plains of Syria-Palestine. They are known in the Old Testament as "Philistines," a term that also gave us the word "Palestine."[24]

sea peoples

Of the many changes brought about by the arrival of the sea peoples in the ancient Near East, two are of special significance here. First, within a century of their arrival, the political order that had existed for over three hundred years dissolved, leaving a power vacuum. Rather than military campaigns involving international powers such as the

Egyptian relief at Medinet Habu depicting prisoners of Ramesses III. Their distinctive headdress identifies them as one of the sea peoples. The Philistines were a sea people group that settled along the coast of Syria-Palestine during the period known as Iron Age I.

AREA CONTROLLED UNDER SAUL, DAVID, AND SOLOMON DURING THE UNITED MONARCHY

Egyptians and the Hittites, local skirmishes and regionalized conflicts ensued. New ethnic groups filled the power vacuum and eventually developed smaller empires of their own, notably the Arameans of Damascus and the Israelites in the highlands of Palestine.

The second result of the arrival of the sea peoples was the spread of new metalworking technology, particularly the use of iron for making weapons. Though it is uncertain which group actually invented iron technology and first exploited it for weaponry, the Philistines clearly had the early advantage in battles with the Israelites due to superior metalworking technology and monopoly of the use of iron (1 Sam. 13:19–22). Gradually iron technology replaced bronze, and archaeologists refer to the period after 1200 BC as the Iron Age.

So the period known as Iron Age I (about 1200–930 BC) began with the invasion of the sea peoples and the shifting of political power throughout the ancient Near East. Sometime toward the end of the Late Bronze Age, Joshua and the children of Israel took Canaan and settled in the central highlands. For at least a couple centuries after the Israelite conquest, Israel governed itself as a loose confederation of twelve tribes, one for each of the sons of Jacob. During this time, leadership rose from the ranks of the common people on a temporary ad hoc basis. These "judges" were divinely gifted and ordained to consolidate the strength and resources of the tribes in times of national or regional crisis. Military threats arose from surrounding neighbors, particularly the Philistines to the southwest. Though a central governing body was not a necessity, the Israelites grew weary of constant military threats from surrounding enemies. They began to long for a permanent king and royal court to maintain a standing army and secure peace for the future.

The Israelite monarchy developed because of this constant threat of military invasion coupled with cultural pressure to become like other nations: "We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles" (1 Sam. 8:19b–20). Samuel was a prophet and judge who led Israel during the time of transition from judges to kings. With God's blessing, Samuel anointed Saul as the first king of Israel. But Saul failed to maintain his relationship with God and was eventually rejected as king of Israel. Saul's life illustrates the importance of guarding our relationship with God as our most important task. After Saul's failure, God instructed Samuel to anoint a man after God's own heart (1 Sam. 13:14), the young David, as the next king of Israel.

Under David's strong leadership, Israel finally defeated the Philistines and forged a degree of peace and security in Syria-Palestine. David's reign ushered in a period of stability that would become Israel's golden age. He unified the tribes and provided economic and political freedom. Though internal strife continued during his reign, he was able to leave a unified kingdom to his son Solomon.

This was the beginning of dynastic succession in ancient Israel.

Solomon expanded Israel's borders to the Euphrates in the north and to the border of Egypt in the south. He ruled during the only period of Israel's history that may be called an empire. He brought great wealth and prosperity to the nation through international trade. God gave Solomon wisdom in all matters, including the ability to govern the people. The royal court grew and became more involved in the affairs of the state. Solomon's fame as an inspiring leader spread around the world, and international contact became commonplace. Solomon also had the privilege of building God's temple in Jerusalem. The reigns of David and Solomon, or the "united monarchy," would always be remembered as the ideal time of peace and prosperity (1 Kings 4:25).

The success of the united monarchy was short-lived. Solomon, like Saul before him, allowed his heart to turn away from God: "his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been" (1 Kings 11:4). Shortly after the death of Solomon, the kingdom split into two weaker nations, Israel in the north and Judah in the south; this became the so-called divided monarchy.

Northern Israel fell quickly into religious apostasy. The first king of the north, Jeroboam I, attempted to use religion for political purposes and compromised the practices of ancient Yahwism inherited from Moses. But a later king of the north went even further. Omri and his son Ahab intentionally combined **Mosaic Yahwism** with **Canaanite Baalism** in an attempt to gain greater political control. The northern kingdom was also

Mosaic Yahwism
Canaanite Baalism

THE ASSYRIAN EMPIRE

plagued by political instability. During the two hundred years of its history (931–722 BC), Israel had nineteen kings in nine separate dynasties. In 722 BC, the capital of northern Israel, Samaria, fell to the Assyrians.

By contrast, Judah, the southern kingdom, continued to have one royal family, the Davidic dynasty, for nearly 350 years (931–587 BC). Although Judah maintained political stability, it also fell into religious apostasy, though much more gradually than its neighbor to the north. Many of the kings of Judah were faithful to the Lord, especially early in the kingdom's history. The final century of Judah's history is marked by an interchange of good kings and bad kings. Judah's capital, Jerusalem, fell to the Babylonians in 587 BC.[25]

Archaeologists use the term Iron Age II for the period 930–539 BC, which covers Israel's divided kingdoms: northern Israel and southern Judah. Elsewhere in the ancient Near East at this time, Egypt was trying to reassert itself as a major world power. But except for a brief moment at the turn of the sixth century BC (Twenty-Sixth Dynasty), Egypt was never again a major player in the ancient world. The real story of Iron Age II is the rise and fall of new empires in Mesopotamia.

Along the banks of the Tigris River in northern Mesopotamia, a new force emerged in the Iron Age that would dominate ancient Near Eastern history for two centuries. Assyrian imperialism emerged in the mid-ninth century and began to impact the politics of Syria-Palestine. Yet Assyria went through a period of internal weakness in the first half of the eighth century. This allowed for the long and prosperous reigns of Jeroboam II in Israel (793–753 BC) and Uzziah in Judah (792–740 BC). But success is not necessarily a sign of God's approval. While both kingdoms prospered during this half century, social injustice and moral decay began to consume the soul of Israel and Judah. This was the backdrop for the first of the classical prophets: Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah. God raised up his servants to warn the nations of impending doom and to call them to repentance.

Assyria's weakness was but a temporary lull in its rapacious drive for more power; the early eighth century was only the calm before the storm. When Tiglath-pileser III brought Assyria back to full strength in 745 BC, the nation was stronger than before and ready to be used as God's instrument of destruction against rebellious northern Israel. During the next two decades, Israel vacillated between paying tribute to the Assyrians and rebelling against them. Finally Tiglath-pileser's son Shalmaneser V laid siege to Israel's capital, Samaria, in 725 BC. Three years later, the northern nation fell (722 BC) and became a province in the enormous Assyrian Empire.

During the next century, Judah also attempted various ways of dealing with the Assyrian threat. For example, Hezekiah of Judah was anti-Assyrian, but his son Manasseh adopted a pro-Assyrian policy. During the

Assyrian relief of Tiglath-pileser III from the Nimrud palace, 728 BC. As king of Assyria he strengthened the empire, and this nation's military might was God's agent of destruction to punish the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC.

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Key Terms

incarnation
Fertile Crescent
Neolithic Age
cuneiform
hieroglyphs
pharaoh
Levant
rift
Via Maris
Vulgate
Paleolithic Age
Mesolithic Age
Chalcolithic Age
Bronze Age
Iron Age
Early Bronze Age
Middle Bronze Age
covenant
Late Bronze Age
New Kingdom
lingua franca
Amarna Letters
sea peoples
Mosaic Yahwism
Canaanite Baalism

Key People and Places

Hammurapi
Hyksos
Kassites
Amenhotep IV
Akhenaten
Hattushili III
Ramesses II
Thutmose III
Tiglath-pileser III
Shalmaneser V
Sennacherib
Esarhaddon
Ashurbanipal
Nabopolassar
Nebuchadnezzar II
Cyrus
Alexander the Great
Zagros Mountains
Caspian Sea
Black Sea
Caucasus Mountains
Arabian Desert
Persian Gulf
Red Sea
Mesopotamia
Euphrates River
Tigris River
Iran
Syria
Lebanon
Babylon
Assur
Nineveh
Libya
Suez Canal
Jordan Rift
Transjordanian Highlands
Acco
Bay of Haifa
Jezreel Valley
Sharon Plain
Philistine Coast
Shephelah
Negeb
Galilee
Ephraim
Judean hill country
Mizpah
Shechem
Shiloh
Bethel
Jerusalem
Bethlehem
Hebron
Huleh Valley
Chinnereth
Jordan Valley
Dead Sea
Arabah
Yarmuk
Jabbok
Arnon
Zered
Bashan
Gilead
Moab
Edom
Gulf of Aqabah
Elath
Haran
Nubia
Thebes
El-Amarna
Anatolia

seventh century, Assyria reached the pinnacle of its imperial power and became the first true world empire, as well as the first in a line of such empires from a Mesopotamian base (Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia) before the power shifted to the west (Greece and Rome). Under the kings of the early seventh century (Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, and Ashurbanipal), the Assyrians were able to defeat their traditional enemies to the north, the Urartians. They even captured faraway Egypt in 663 BC. But throughout this period of international domination, Assyria had a persistent and ever-present problem closer to home. The Chaldeans of southern Babylonia were growing ever more rebellious and difficult to contain. They soon became independent and eventually replaced the Assyrians.

Under the able rulership of Nabopolassar and his famous son Nebuchadnezzar II, Babylonia participated in Assyria's defeat and became the next great world empire. During the forty-three-year rule of Nebuchadnezzar (605–562 BC), Babylonia reached the apex of its wealth and political power in what is called the Neo-Babylonian period. Judah's response to Babylonia's imperial aspirations alternated between two

Summary

1. Israel was part of the ancient Near East that is now called the Middle East.
2. The three geographical regions of the ancient Near East—Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Syria-Palestine—were joined by an arch of rich soil called the Fertile Crescent.
3. The four subregions of Israel are the coastal plains, the ridge or central mountain range, the Jordan Rift, and the Transjordanian Highlands.
4. Two of the important highways of the ancient Near East passed through Syria-Palestine: the *Via Maris*, or way of the sea, and the King's Highway.
5. The history of the Old Testament spans a period of about two millennia as opposed to the New Testament, which covers a century.
6. The invention of writing—cuneiform in Mesopotamia and hieroglyphics in Egypt—began during the Early Bronze Age.
7. The sea peoples probably fled to the ancient Near East from Mycenaean cities in Greece in about 1250 BC. Their arrival brought political changes and new metalworking technology.
8. The constant threat of military invasion from neighbors caused the Israelites to want a king.
9. The period of David's reign was a very stable time in the history of Israel.
10. Under Solomon's reign, the borders of Israel expanded northward to the Euphrates and southward to Egypt.
11. Jewish exiles returned from Babylon in three separate groups led by Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

tactical strategies. Some favored rebellion, supported by a pathetic trust in a weakened Egypt ("that splintered reed," Isa. 36:6). Others, such as Jeremiah, urged Judah's submission to Babylon as a vassal state. In 597 BC Nebuchadnezzar attempted to end Judah's rebellious streak by capturing Jerusalem and taking King Jehoiachin into exile in Babylonia, along with many of the people of Jerusalem, including the prophet Ezekiel. Another rebellion under Zedekiah resulted in the total destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC.

The Babylonians not only destroyed the city and deported much of the population, but they also tore down the temple and effectively ended the Davidic dynasty. The

THE PERSIAN EMPIRE

Study Questions

1. How is the Old Testament "incarnational"?
2. Why was the location of Israel strategic in ancient times?
3. Locate on a map the geographical regions of the ancient Near East and discuss their major characteristics.
4. Locate on a map the four subregions of Israel and discuss their major characteristics.
5. Discuss the international social and political climate during the patriarchal age of Israel's history.
6. Discuss the international social and political climate during the times of Moses and Joshua.
7. What was the political climate of the ancient Near East in about 1200 BC? What effect did this have on the Israelites?
8. What political changes did Iron Age II bring to the ancient Near East? What ramifications did this have for Israel?

Davidic line would barely survive through Jehoiachin during the exile. The loss of temple and kingship was a dominant and formative event in Old Testament history. It forced a rethinking of old theological assumptions and made Israel reformulate its earlier religious convictions, especially the nature of God's covenant. All of this formed the backdrop for some of Israel's most significant prophetic figures: Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Ezekiel.

Israel's Exile and Restoration: Ezra and Nehemiah

The final archaeological age of the Old Testament period is the Persian Age (539–332 BC), otherwise known as Iron Age III. The reign of the Persian king Cyrus marks the beginning of the Persian Empire. This kingdom was one of the largest in the ancient world, stretching from the isles of the Aegean Sea and the Nile across the ancient Near East to the Indus Valley.[26] The Persian Empire controlled the ancient world for two centuries. Alexander the Great conquered the Persians in about 330 BC and ended the string of world empires from a Mesopotamian base.

Cyrus established a new policy regarding subjugated peoples and their deities. Unlike the Assyrians and the Babylonians, Cyrus desired to placate as many gods as possible. He felt that he could better maintain and govern his vast empire with a policy of tolerance and benevolence, rather than one of cruelty and brutality. The Jewish exile officially ended when Cyrus decreed that captive peoples in Babylonia were free to return to their homelands and establish a degree of self-rule. The Old Testament interprets this historical event as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah (2 Chron. 36:22–23; Ezra 1:1–4).

During the next century, three separate groups of Jewish exiles returned to Jerusalem to rebuild and start over.[27] The first group came under the political leadership of Zerubbabel and the religious leadership of the high priest Jeshua (Ezra 1–6). The returnees tried to rebuild the temple but had to battle opposition, discouragement, and lack of resources. It was only after the ministries of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah that the second temple was finally finished in 516 BC.

Ezra the priest and scribe led the second expedition from Babylonia in 458 BC (Ezra 7–10). Ezra's task was not to rebuild the country materially as the first returnees had done. Rather, he was concerned with the social and spiritual well-being of the people.

Nehemiah led the third return to Jerusalem in 445 BC (Neh. 1–13). Nehemiah was a Jewish exile who had risen to high office in the Persian royal court. He understood his task primarily as one of rebuilding Jerusalem's city walls and providing better defense for

its inhabitants. After completion of the wall, Nehemiah stayed in Jerusalem as governor of the Persian province.

The Old Testament ends with God's people restored to the land and a new temple rebuilt for proper worship of God. Yet this was clearly not a "kingdom of God," with a son of David on the throne of an empire with worldwide significance. The promises of God's sacred covenant with his people would have to wait for another time and place. The Old Testament ends in expectation and faith. God would yet fulfill his purposes in his own timing and in his own way.

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